THE NME CRITICS ALBUMS

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Thom Yorke: Oui, Ja, Yes? Er, we'll get back to you on that if it's OK

RADIOHEAD MAKE THEIR HUGELY-ANTICIPATED RETURN TO GUITARS. BUT DOES IT CONSTITUTE PROGRESS? TOUGH ONE, THAT

RADIOHEAD
Hail To The Thief
(PARLOPHONE)

When 'OK Computer', Radiohead's third album swept aside all competition in 1997's end of year polls, it was with good reason. Not only was it a toweringly complex and beautiful record but, alongside releases from Spiritualized ('Ladies And Gentlemen, We Are Floating In Space') and Primal Scream ('Vanishing Point') it seemed to point to a new spirit of adventurousness and experimentalism after the musical primitivism of Britpop.

It's already been extensively debated that this was both a blessing *and* a curse. On one hand, it propelled them towards becoming one of the biggest bands in the world, but on the other it confused their creative process to such an extent that when 'Kid A' finally appeared three years later, it seemed they'd lost sight of what made them such an exceptional band in the first place. Being simply a *rock* group no longer appeared to be enough, they now had to prove they were serious experimentalists.

Unfortunately, as Radiohead have proved over the course of both 'Kid A' and its successor 'Amnesiac', they're a much better rock band than they are an experimental one. If you play those two records now, you're immediately drawn to the moments where the band are at their most conventional – songs like 'Knives Out', 'The National Anthem' and 'Pyramid Song'. The electronic pieces took on the superior work of artists like Autechre and Aphex Twin and served simply as distractions.

Prior to *NME*'s first hearing, all speculation hinted that 'Hail To The Thief' would mark a return to the more conventional dynamics of 'The Bends' and 'OK Computer'. That always seemed like wishful thinking, and so it proves. 'Hail To The Thief' is a continuation of the direction pursued post-'OK Computer' and it finds the band at a creative impasse. In their attempts to pay lip service to both their experimental and traditional impulses, they're stuck in a no man's land between the two.

That's not to say there's not some exceptional music on this record, it's just once again the impact of the best moments is dulled by the inclusion of some indifferent electronic stuff. With 14 tracks, running to almost an hour, there's certainly some slack here that they'd have done well to dispense with. In particular, 'Backdrifts' with its waves of keyboard oscillations and 'The Gloaming' with its static-cloaked beats could easily have been left off to the detriment of no-one.

What makes that even more frustrating is that Radiohead display on several occasions just why they've been garlanded with so much critical praise over the years. Much has been made of the political nature of the title (a reference to George Bush's 'stolen' election victory in 2000), but aside from the general air of foreboding and some oblique lyrical references ('The Gloaming''s attempt to deal with the aftermath of 9/11 and 'A Wolf At The Door''s cut'n'paste dissatisfaction), there's no real anti-anything message this time.

Instead, the best moments occur when Thom Yorke opens up a more personal and overtly emotional side to his songwriting. The two songs that hint at his fears for his child's future (the succinct, sparse 'I Will' and the closing avalanche of 'A Wolf At The Door') are affecting, as is the album's outstanding track, the piano-led ballad 'Sail To The Moon'.

Elsewhere, other highlights emerge when this more intimate songwriting is fused with Jonny Greenwood's consistently startling guitar-playing. On the opening '2+2=5', for instance, the intricate guitar line that suddenly flares into an exhilarating surge of thrashed chords is especially impressive, showing a directness that's eluded Radiohead for half a decade. Likewise, 'Scatterbrain' is warm and immediate in the same way as 'Knives Out' and 'Street Spirit' were on first hearing, while 'Myxomatosis', with its wall of fuzzed bass, offers something new and inventive.

It's a shame then that this material has to jostle with some other more indifferent moments. Alongside those tracks we've already mentioned, 'Sit Down. Stand Up', with its brittle programmed drum pattern, and the truly underwhelming 'There There' (bafflingly, the album's first single) are pedestrian at best, and serve to break up the momentum of the whole record.

It's ironic that 'Hail To The Thief' emerges at a time when the fashion once more is for a more primitive musical experience. Both The Strokes and The White Stripes have shown that a pared-down emotional rawness can be both commercially and critically successful. Once again, Radiohead find themselves an anachronism but this time not in a particularly positive way. They feel cumbersome and self-important beside these younger groups and now face a challenge that groups like U2 and REM have wrestled with: how to stay relevant when you're surrounded by such heavy expectation and machinery.

'Hail To The Thief', then, is a good rather than great record. It sounds exactly how you expect it to sound after 'Kid A' and 'Amnesiac' – and that's the problem. Radiohead are a band still coming to terms with the puzzle of what to do after you've made an album universally hailed as one of the greatest of all time. They're finding it's a trick that's hard to produce twice.

James Oldham

7

PAST FORM

Radiohead: a career in NME reviews

Pablo Honey (1993)
"Although it's hard to shake off a feeling of anti-climactic disappointment, that's probably our fault not Radiohead's. They're getting there."

The Bends (1995)
"Radiohead clearly resolved to make an album so stunning it would make people forget their own name, never mind that albatross-like 45 ('Creep'). And, by George, they've done it! Almost every track here is a potentially huge hit single."

OK Computer (1997)
"Truly, this is one of the greatest albums in living memory – and the one that distances Radiohead from their peers by an interstellar mile."

Kid A (2000)
"The patently magnificent construct called 'Kid A' betrays a band playing one-handed just to prove they can, scared to commit itself emotionally. And isn't that what this is supposedly all about?"

Amnesiac (2001)
"This is a record that chooses its rarefied isolation, seeks its elevation, a damaged record, yes, but not a fragile one. Radiohead are in their heaven and nothing's right with the world."

I Might Be Wrong (2001)
"Shorn of studio trickery, this live album is forced to highlight the gifts that make Radiohead special: that they write brilliant songs which Thom Yorke sings beautifully."